

Sarah E Butters  
66 Campbell Ave.  
Vernon, CT 06066

Chair Julie Kushner and Cochair Robyn A. Porter, Labor Committee  
Ranking Members Rob Samson and Harry Arora, and Labor Committee Members

Dear Legislators,

I beg you to pass bill HB5248. We need to do everything we can to help the returning citizens stay healthy and employed in good jobs and government jobs, with benefits that will save them from the prospect of lifelong poverty and a permanent sense of psychological desperation. The obstacles we place in front of them set them up for failure.

My knowledge of the problems of ex-offenders comes from serving as a volunteer chaplain at a halfway house run by Community Partners in Action in Hartford. The men there are in an almost no-win situation. Their task is to find jobs, but what jobs? They can park cars and shovel snow, but only in locations within walking distance of their locked facility or on a bus route. How will they save up for rent and security deposit? How can they get a car loan? Without a car, finding and keeping a job is about a hundred times more difficult. If they find work and commute by bus they are still in a precarious position. With no insurance and no car, how will they stay on the meds they need?

I know one ex offender who had been mentally ill since his youth, without diagnosis until he was arrested and seen by the prison psychiatrist around the age of 20. Medicine turned his life and behavior around during the next eleven years. Feeling healthy and safe at last, he wondered why his mom had always yelled "you're crazy" but had never taken him to a doctor. Arriving at the halfway house at age 31, he found a job loading trucks, but with the complication of bus travel and work hours he couldn't keep his medical appointments. He ran out of his psychiatric meds. His state of agitation was visible a mile away and I witnessed his terrible mental suffering. This poor man was absolutely terrified that he might lose control while on the job, punch somebody, get fired, and go back to prison, but he also felt he would be fired if he asked for hours off to see the doctor.

At these low skilled jobs, the men know they are expendable and might be out of work any day. I know one fellow who had the unimaginable good luck to get a full-time job at Home Depot in Manchester with benefits, but without a car, he had to rely on the bus from Hartford to in Manchester, and the problems of bus scheduling soon cost him his job.

One man I knew quite well was "Joe," a trained practical nurse, around age 65, who had graduated from one of the community colleges years ago. Throughout his time in prison, which was some 14 years, he committed himself to a kind of a personal atonement, serving "the least of these" his neighbors in a self-giving way. He sought out the responsibility of feeding, bathing, and caring for men with amputations

and terminal illnesses, also keeping them engaged in conversation, companionship, and humor during the years of their suffering and decline. When Joe got out, he got a job as a caregiver for a friend who was ill, but comfortably well off. They had met a in a 12-step program.

The job was a perfect fit. Joe didn't need a background check or licensing, and he was able to use his considerable skills and talents meaningfully.

But the outcome was horrifying. Joe's parole officer charged him with violating his parole in some way, which was untrue. When the matter eventually came before the judge it was ruled that Joe had committed no violation whatsoever. However, he had been forced to waste many months in prison all over again. During those months, his friend and employer, assuming the violation was true:

1. dropped Joe from employment and friendship
2. stopped seeing his doctor, since Joe was not there to schedule and drive him
3. Stopped taking his medication correctly without Joe's supervision
4. Ended up in the hospital gravely ill, *and suffered a leg amputation*, all because of the ill-informed parole officer who wouldn't listen to Joe's protests of innocence. Reforms are needed all around.

I include Joe's story as an example of how precarious is the life of a parolee. Even when parolees do find meaningful sustaining work, their well-earned happiness can just go poof.

One more case is particularly relevant to the bill under discussion. My neighbor's son here in Vernon is out of prison, clean and sober, but can only get employment *under the table* installing floors. There are no taxes, no records of work hours, no Social Security in the future, no savings, and no stability for his three impoverished children.

Respectfully Submitted

Sarah Butters

Sarah Butters

860-970-7338

Episcopal Church in Connecticut  
"Faith Behind Bars and Beyond"  
committee.